

of the Soviet Union (Boggs and Pollard 2016, 2). This is entangled with a profound sense of nostalgia that games like the ones discussed in this article cater to. After all, one of the most appealing conceptual tenets of a bi-polar world order, regardless of how distorted or manufactured it is, is that it provides a seemingly *simpler* world.

The games analysed for this study are, in order of appearance in the discussion below, *Freedom Fighters* (2003), *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010), *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Conviction* (2010), *Alekhine's Gun* (2016), *Operation Flashpoint: Cold War Crisis* (2001), and *Homefront* (2011). These games have been produced after the Cold War has ended, while there are a number of games, notably *Missile Command* (1980) and the controversial *Raid Over Moscow* (1984), that address the Cold War while being produced in this era. The reason why only games that were produced in a temporal distance to the historic era they address have been chosen is that a key interest of this study is the communication of stereotypical representations of the Cold War through popular media without the player's immediate experience of the conflict. This has to do with the presentation of a bi-polar worldview, which has been generated based on cultural narratives that enforce ideas of friend and foe images. This creates a double-filtered presentation of history in these games because firstly, history is experienced through a second-hand and thus subjectivised representation and secondly, the historical discourses displayed in those games tend to be influenced by Cold War images formed in popular media of that time rather than historical documents. Furthermore, the selected games share that they are played from an American perspective and mostly depict the period between the end of the Second World War and the 1990s, while some games only allude to this era. The Cold War era can be split into three phases that mirror the degree of hostility and conflict between the US and the USSR. During the Confrontation Phase (1948–1962; Lightbody 1999, 19–35), the two superpowers were progressively moving closer to

The propagandist seeks to change the way people understand an issue or situation for changing their actions and expectations in ways that are desirable to the interest group. In order for propaganda to be effective, it is important to rely on emotions and never argue, to cast propaganda into the pattern of *we* versus an *enemy*, to reach groups as well as individuals, and hide the propagandist as much as possible (Biddle 1931, 283–295). This often goes hand in hand with censorship, which follows similar effects to propaganda.

During the Cold War era, the US government relied on an extensive propaganda machinery to generate images that portray the US as good, thereby justifying their actions, and the USSR, communist, and socialist forces as evil. This propaganda either emphasised American virtues, such as the family, capitalism, and free speech, or defamed communism. It was state-directed, yet rather than being overtly marked as produced by the government, it often has been incorporated into popular media and thus permeated every aspect of American culture (Marcus 1999, 2). The close link between the producers of popular media content and the government resulted in the “virtual military/entertainment complex” (Sterling 1993, cf. Pfister 2017). The intelligence services designed a careful picture of the ideal America, which was then assimilated into popular media. Nonetheless, the authorities “faced difficult choices in reconciling their symbolic *America* with the complex political, economic, and strategic realities of the early Cold War” (Belmonte 2008, 7). America was far from an ideal nation in the aftermath of the Second World War and marked by internal conflict in a fight against inequalities, epitomised, for example, in the Civil Rights Movement and feminist groups. This, however, did not stop the American information operatives employed by the United States Information Agency (USIA) and the State Department, among other organisations, from painting a positive image of America (Bernhard 1999, 179). This characteristic is certainly not unique to the US and is found for any

nation yet realised in different modes. American authorities promoted images of democracy, freedom, equality, and prosperity, while the reality was largely marked by social, racial, and gender inequalities in all these aspects. To account for these negativisms, discourses emphasising America's accomplishments were spread, while largely ignoring any problems. Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard (2016, 3) have characterised this state as follows:

"A great font of information, opinion, communication, and entertainment, the corporate media is a linchpin of ideological hegemony, a vital repository of values, attitudes, beliefs, and myths that shape public opinion on a daily basis."

This is as true for the Cold War era as it is for the present, and as a result, these positive ideas associated with America of that time are still problematic today because, as Sharon Monteith has argued, it is "a problem to define a decade [the 1960s] about which myths and images often masquerade as cultural history" (Monteith 2008, 1). What we, from today's perspective, perceive as historical records of the time often rely on these stereotypically positive interpretations of public life during the Cold War era. This is notably the case if we experience history through popular media such as video games, which frequently privilege player experience and recognition value over historical accuracy.

These positive representations of America have subsequently shaped its internal as well as its external perception. Movies, such as *Red Dawn* (1984), *Rocky IV* (1985), and *Hunt for Red October* (1990), emphasised American heroism in their fight against evil powers that appear to threaten the free world. Situation comedies, such as *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952–1966), portrayed the family, consisting of the father as the breadwinner, the mother as a devoted housewife, and the children as obeying their parents, as one of the highest attributes to be valued. Even cartoons for children, such as *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle and Friends* (1959–1964) or

Roger Ramjet (1965–1969), highlighted the importance of defending American values against enemies wanting to destroy them, who, in both cases, are clearly portrayed as being Soviet. Pulp fiction, like Joseph L. Whatley’s *Purgatory of the Conquered* (1956), and comic books/graphic novels, such as *Is this Tomorrow?* (1947), further contributed to the population’s fear of communism as a threat to American values. Educational films like *How to Spot a Communist* (1955) were less reserved in displaying the tight relationship between government protocol and media content. The mechanisms used in these media outputs are still largely found in video games today.

As these representative examples show, popular culture has constructed hyperreal America(nness) during the Cold War era. Many dystopian scenarios, which threatened the integrity of the US democratic system, found their way into popular media, for example invasion and subversion scenarios, such as alternate history or, by way of allegory, in the form of alien invasions and creature features (Schulzke 2013, 261). The audience was also interested in interfering with or outsmarting Soviet machinations in those proxy (war) arenas, while nuclear holocaust scenarios painted a bleak picture (Pfister 2017). In all these scenarios, idealised articulations of American identity were created and disseminated, namely a caution against communist ideas as well as an emphasis on the American (democratic) way of life as the only right one and on American values as being superior. This propagation of American values in various popular media has largely led to a cultural system that resembles Jean Baudrillard’s concept of the hyperreal (Baudrillard 1994). These images of America are no longer a form of ideology that is grounded in reality, but they are, as Baudrillard has argued, “concealing the fact that the real is no longer real” (Baudrillard 1994, 13). It becomes difficult to distinguish between a simulated reality as displayed in popular media and real reality. Bearing in mind that mass media have gained unprecedented importance

within a very short period of time especially in the US during the Cold War era, it is not surprising that the audience had to get used to the reality-status (or rather the lack thereof) of the images presented to them (Baofu 2009, 11). In a state of hyperreality, fiction and reality blend to the effect that it becomes difficult to tell them apart. This new reality is thus, in Baudrillard's (1994, 1) words, "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality." The US propaganda machinery appears to have used this hyperreality in order to constitute discourses that distract from real reality to the effect that defined images of America have been created that need to be defended. Very often, this has been achieved through *ex negativo* approaches, namely by depicting bleak scenarios of how the US would look like under communism. The video game *Freedom Fighters* paints such a dreary picture and thereby resembles the Armed Forces Information Film movie *Red Nightmare* (1957; also known as *Freedom and You*) and Reed Crandall's graphic novel *The Godless Communism* (1961–1962). By way of contrast, the predominance of hyperreality is also evident in the game-like appearance of war, which Baudrillard (1995) has proposed for the Gulf War. The age of constructed reality therefore not only confuses video games with reality but also reality with video games.

Despite the state of hyperreality, it appears that in the process of getting acquainted with new media, audiences have learned to distinguish between fiction and reality. This raises questions with regard to the effects propaganda incorporated in video games has on players. It is proposed that gamers (and popular media users in general) are well aware of the difference between the game-world and the real world despite the high level of active engagement in it. Players know that what they experience in the process of playing is not real but only evokes "quasi feelings" (Walton 1990, 245). Nonetheless, video games that heavily rely on hyperreal images of America generated in popular media during the Cold War era influence the way

Congressional hearing in 1976 (Hastedt 2011, 517). In real life, then, media control has played an important role in influencing the population's attitude towards the war, the enemy as well as democratic values. The reason for this is that the Cold War was "a cultural political struggle about the *hearts* and *minds* of ordinary people and [...] meant to undermine each other's ability to control the domestic public sphere" (Bastiansen, Klimke and Werenskjold 2019, 4, original emphasis). In this sense, media propaganda was one of the central weapons for American warfare bodies. It allowed them to spread positive images of themselves, emphasising the *Americanness* of defined values, while vilifying the enemy, who aims at destroying them.

Besides the role of media for spreading propaganda, brainwashing, programming, and an infiltration of spies behind enemy lines featured prominently in creating a sense of paranoia during the Cold War era. While paranoia *per se* is not a mechanism of *Americanness*, it is the result of a truly American value, namely that of an anti-communist attitude. This anti-communism "grew out of and became the institutionalized version of the anti-radicalism, nativism, and Americanization movements" (Ceplair 2011, 13). Paranoia makes visible the lasting impact of the two Red Scares – the spread of a general fear of the possible surge of communism in the US in 1919–1920 and 1946–1954 (Goldstein 2016, xiii) – and a general anxiety over subversion and invasion that undergirds the American psyche. Paranoia does indeed speak to a key tenet of what it means to be a good American and it is tied to this belief in defending the nation as a hallmark of democracy, which is expressed in the civic duty to be vigilant (Halliwell 2007, 8). Consequently, paranoia has become an inherent state of the American thought, permeating every aspect of culture (Marcus 1999, 2). It is private as well as public, which is evident in the fact that the US government almost daily publicised new and even more impossible-sounding evils committed by the USSR and uncovered by the US secret agencies despite their ever-

growing observation and infiltration system (Sulick 2013, 6), or by assigning every aspect of evil in the world to the menacing communism spread by the USSR. The foundation of this paranoia seems to be a desire that something malignant is there in the outside world because it needs to be there in order for the US to defend their role as saviours (Kovel 1983, 77). This escalating paranoia is fed by propaganda spreading a portrayal of good versus evil by disguising emotive stories and make-believe as facts and news – a state that has a contemporary ring to it.

Call of Duty: Black Ops takes up these themes and instils a sense of persecution mania in the player through creating a narrative that is marked by gaps to be filled in the game's progression. For the majority of the game, the player assumes the role of Studies and Observation Group (SOG) and CIA operative Alex Mason. Tied to a chair, he is questioned about Soviet sleeper cells in the US, which are activated through secret number broadcasts. Mason's memory is cloudy and his flashbacks are incoherent. The player needs to learn how to distinguish between truth and lie, which Mason already proposes in the world premier trailer:

"A lie is a lie. Just because they write it down and call it history doesn't make it the truth. We live in a world where seeing is not believing, where only a few know what really happened. We live in a world where everything you know is wrong." (*Call of Duty: Black Ops* 2010, world premier trailer)

Mason emphasises that his reality is a hyperreality as it is not what it appears to be. This is displayed in *Black Ops* through generally opposing good and evil, while nevertheless implying that both sides are capable of lying for their own benefit. Still, there is a difference between US and USSR lies. The game is set in various prominent historical settings, such as the Bay of the Pigs invasion or the Battle of Khe Sanh. While drawing on real historical events, the game can be "understood as processing this historic period in a less complex system" (Reisner 2013, 249). The bi-polar world

communist or socialist tendencies. Against all odds, the protagonist saves the world from destruction, and in a sense embodies the American Dream, which essentially implies that if you work hard, you can achieve anything. *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Conviction* engages with the question of morality from a distinct angle through focusing on an avoidance of direct conflict rather than encouraging massive shoot-outs. The player assumes the role of American agent Sam Fisher, who is dispatched to different regions of the world to complete set tasks. The game begins with Fisher heading to Valetta, Malta, to track down the man who has killed his daughter, Sarah, in a hit-and-run. Before catching the murderer, however, Fisher is caught by a Third Echelon Splinter Cell team, for whom he used to work. Back in the US, his former colleague Grim releases Fisher on the premise that he helps her investigate Third Echelon. This complex initial situation already points towards the complicated networks generated in the game.

The question of morality is a component of all the central themes in *Splinter Cell: Conviction*, which are secret agencies, double agents, and espionage, to the effect that the line between good and evil cannot be drawn based on the nationalities of the individual agents. Fisher – and the player – need to learn whom to trust and which sacrifices to make in order to get what they want. For the exchange of information, buildings that function as popular symbols of *Americanness* are used as meeting places, such as the Washington Monument or the Lincoln Memorial. The climax of the story takes place in the Oval Office, which stands for the place where democracy is constituted and defended. These places share that they symbolise a sense of freedom, independence, and truth that the US have tried to communicate to their people and the world during the Cold War era. In this sense, *Splinter Cell: Conviction* not only thematises aspects central to the Cold War, such as infiltrated spy networks, but also communicates and propagates features positively associated with

This film had an impact on other Cold War themed video games, such as *Freedom Fighters* (Boulding 2003) and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009). *Homefront* alludes to the Cold War by establishing a dichotomy between the good US, which need to defend their territory from communist North Korean forces that have already taken over much of the East Asian region, including Japan and the majority of the Southeast Asian states. Producer Dex Smither said that the atmosphere of the game, its gameplay, and its story are heavily influenced by *Half-Life* (1998) in order to create a sense of an America that is perceived as wanting to have order, liberty, and peace, which stands in contrast to the menacing Korean occupiers (Schwerdtel 2010). In this sense, *Homefront* opposes games that emphasise action-rich scenes packed with special effects, such as *Modern Warfare 2*. The depiction of the rebel headquarters, called Oasis, for example, is portrayed in a calm and tranquil mode, which is supported by serene ambient music. Nonetheless, peaceful, quiet scenes are disturbed by the traces left behind by the Korean invasion, such as burnt-out cars and abandoned houses. Such scenes form the rationale for protagonist Robert Jacobs' actions because they define what the rebels are fighting for: An America that can enjoy the beliefs and values it has built over the years of its self-definition and that the communist invaders have tried to brutally annihilate. Similar to pro-American propaganda during the Cold War era, *Homefront* therefore utilises ideas of *Americanness* and presents them within a highly emotional framework in order to generate a dichotomy between good and evil.

Conclusion

From a historical perspective, propaganda has, in one way or another, always been linked to popular media. This became notably pronounced during the Cold War era, when American state authorities used many different media outlets to communicate

The mechanisms of *Americanness* discussed here were either non-physical, such as free media, free speech, capitalism, heroism, and justice, or physical, for example the family, locations symbolising democracy (the Oval Office or the Washington Monument), flags, and Uncle Sam. The analysed video games have each incorporated them propagandistically, which has the effect that they produce a sense of a hyperreal American culture that is akin to the one created in popular media during the Cold War era. In our experience of American culture through popular media today, it becomes difficult to see beyond this idealised concept of *Americanness*, partly because we have become very familiar with it. This is the reason why (Cold) War themed video games are so popular because they present us with a simplified worldview we can easily recognise. Drawing on conventions of presentation, they establish a consciousness that distorts history in favour of stylised depictions. Whether or not these games are thus disseminators of (Cold War) propaganda or apolitical popular media outputs that draw on easily recognisable structures in order to increase their players' enjoyment becomes a question that cannot be easily answered.

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